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Missile Defence Re-Visited: A Reality Check for Canada[1]

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Introduction

Funny thing, conventional wisdom. It purports to reflect consensus on an issue - presumably after thorough debate. The danger arises when prognostications are accepted uncritically; when the attentive public becomes convinced it knows where the 'truth' lies and debate stops.

Such is the case with US plans to develop a shield against inter-continental ballistic missiles launched by accident or by so-called 'rogue' states. The project envisions a series of radars (to be replaced eventually by satellites) for the detection of ballistic missiles in flight, and a single bank of anti-missile interceptors stationed in Alaska and possibly California.

When the proposal was first debated in early 2001 Canadian reactions ranged from polite skepticism to angry rejectionism. But Washington is pressing ahead with a plan to create a limited defence grid by 2005 - the security of the homeland being of primary concern. Some allied countries are pitching it. The United Kingdom and Denmark are set to approve the enhancement of radars on their territory which would assist in the detection and tracking of rockets in-bound to the North American continent.

At the same time, policy-makers in Ottawa have been in no hurry to either endorse or reject Canadian participation. Buoyed by the now muted objections of Russia and China both Prime Minister Jean Chretien and some of his likely successors have been more open to the prospect of allowing the binational North American Aerospace Defence (NORAD) command to expand its mandate from one of missile detection to missile defence.[2] But Ottawa is not ready to commit even though it knows that Washington does not require Canadian money, technology or territory in order to put its plan into action.

The delay introduces the possibility of Canadian military officers serving in NORAD headquarters in Colorado having to leave the room if an attack is carried out with a ballistic missile rather than a cruise missile - a threat against which they are permitted to respond. A strange scenario, but one which captures the dilemma faced by a country which realizes that the potency of its small defence effort increases through bilateral co-operation, but still harbours doubts about any revolutionary changes in US defence planning.

Reality Check

Why the doubts? Exactly what are the arguments for and against a continent-wide missile shield? Have the proponents and opponents engaged in a constructive debate? Have they submitted their arguments for critical review? Have their critiques been fact-based or have they relied on myth-making and fear-mongering? Good public policy demands that the arguments for and against be subject to greater scrutiny than has been the case thus far. Consider first the case against missile defence:

1) *Missile defence is not technically feasible.* Not yet, but it may be. The first tests failed to register a hit. But when breaking in revolutionary new technologies - and missile defence is nothing if not revolutionary - it is unreasonable to expect success during the first few attempts. In almost any field of endeavour, progress is the result of incremental improvements to immature technologies and techniques. Sceptics once laughed at the prospect of powered flight, space travel and organ transplants. But each became reality as a result of scientific perseverance and financial investment. And even a 50% probability of success against an incoming missile is better than none at all. If the suggestion that the offence will always have the advantage over the defence were valid in all cases, police forces would have long ago stopped equipping their officers with bullet-proof vests, as the chances of them stopping all commercially available ammunition are virtually nil.

2) *Nation-wide missile defence can only be realized by breaking arms control treaties.* Not true. Article 15 of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty permitted a signatory to withdraw from the

accord for reasons of 'supreme national interest' and with six months' notice. Having done so, construction of a defence grid providing national coverage becomes quite legal. Like it or not, the United Sates has abided by these provisions. But more important is the mere existence of Article 15. Clearly, the signatories believed in 1972 that their relationship would change over time; that it would improve, making the original rationale for the Treaty - the avoidance of unrestricted growth of their nuclear stockpiles - obsolete.

The 1967 Outer Space Treaty (OST) prohibits the testing of weapons in space, making it legally (and technically) difficult to develop a reliable space-based defence. But if research and development (R&D) take place on earth, the Treaty's limits do not apply.[3] Furthermore, if the defence consists of lasers or 'kinetic kill' weapons which physically strike the missile warhead, then the defence is technically legal since neither countermeasure is proscribed by the Treaty. Only weapons of mass destruction are prohibited from being deployed in space, and the proposed US system does not even contemplate this.

In any event, space-based defences are unlikely to be a high priority given that ground-based interceptor technology is still in its embryonic stages and is eating up the lion's share of R&D funding. Indeed, if the latter can be perfected, space-based weapons become redundant. Thus in the years to come one should expect that only the detection system (composed of early warning and tracking satellites) will be located in space.

3) *Missile defence will spur an arms race.* Not necessarily. This, the favourite argument of the 'con' side, gives little thought as to whether conditions are truly conducive such an outcome. The mere deployment of a new system cannot in and of itself ignite an arms race. If it were otherwise, Canada would be engaged in such a competition with the United States. History shows that an arms race are founded upon an adversarial political relationship between two or more parties; there must first be mutual suspicion causing each side to respond in kind to increases in the number of weapons in its opponent's inventory. Arms races are symptoms of poor relations; they are not the cause. But since the ideological antagonisms that stoked the US-Soviet arms races of the 1960s and 1970s are dead and buried, what is perhaps the greatest incentive to engage in a nuclear (re-)build-up should no longer be an issue.

And whereas an arms race envisions mutual increases in the sizes of nuclear arsenals, both Russia and the US will see theirs drop significantly in the years to come. Russia's will do so due to the obsolescence of older strategic weapons systems, and an inability to pay for more than token modernization of what remains. America's will do the same. Early in his presidency George W. Bush stated that the demise of the Soviet threat had left America with a stock of nukes far in excess of its future security needs. And if modernization of these smaller arsenals does occur, this will not constitute an arms race, as qualitative and quantitative improvements are two different things.

That President Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed to mutual reductions beyond START 2 levels despite the former's stated determination to build a missile shield suggest that disarmament and defence can indeed co-exist. So is an arms race a realistic possibility? It is difficult to envision let alone rationalize such a frightful scenario when neither the political incentives nor the resources exist.

As for the other major nuclear player - China - its small nuclear deterrent may be neutralized if the defence system is not limited in scope and capability. An expansion of this deterrent would be an unwelcome consequence of the Bush plan. It must be studiously avoided by keeping the number of missile interceptors small. But it would not constitute an arms race since America's deterrent would still shrink from current levels. And as with Russia, relations between Washington and Beijing are not characterized by a commitment to bury each other. Mutual interests in fostering bilateral trade and stability in the Taiwan Strait, should mitigate suspicions regarding each other's intentions.

Furthermore, since only the US has the technology and financial resources to even consider weaponizing space, there is no question of a competitor trying to achieve parity. Thus an arm race in space is as unlikely as one on Earth.

4) *Arms control will suffer, and proliferation result.* The proliferation of ballistic missile technology and weapons of mass destruction can happen even in the absence of missile defence. India, Israel, Pakistan, and North Korea - all missile- and nuclear-armed - acquired these technologies long before there was any talk in Washington of constructing a defence grid. And most did so in response to local security concerns - specifically, long-standing hostilities with their immediate neighbours - rather than suspicions of US intentions. Moreover, arms control agreements can lull one into a false sense of security. North Korea has admitted that it was engaged in nuclear bomb-making despite an agreement with the Clinton Administration to cease and desist. All this suggests that the causal relationship between the President Bush's plans and the spread of dangerous technologies in volatile regions of the world may have been greatly overstated.

5) *Rogues are more likely to smuggle a weapon of mass destruction into a target country.* Skeptics argue that a ballistic missile is the least likely means of delivery since it can be tracked back to its launch point, inviting decisive retaliation. Much better to hide a warhead in a tramp streamer and sail it into New York harbour. By this logic, there should be no incentive for anyone - rogue or otherwise - to have a missile program. The fact that states such as North Korea do illustrates the utility of missiles as well as the high strategic value placed on their associated technologies. Pyongyang has sold nuclear and/or missile technology to Pakistan and Yemen and is now using them to extract financial aid from the US.

Recall also that missile defence is just that - for defence against missiles. It makes no claim to be effective against other means of delivering a weapon of mass destruction. Let the intelligence services and the maritime arms of the national security apparatus (ie. the coast guard, navy, customs, local port authorities) deal with suspect merchant vessels.

6) *Missile defence will instill a sense of invulnerability on the United States, tempting the Bush Administration to further 'adventurism'.* The system would do so only if the groundbreaking technologies can be made to work. It is virtually impossible to envision this in the lifespan of the current Administration - even if it secures a second term.

If the 'cons' have gone unchallenged, the same may be said for many of the arguments put forward by the proponents of a missile defence offering national coverage. Consider:

1) *Missile defence technology is making great strides.* Despite guarded optimism that the technology will yield a reasonable defence, there is no denying that it is still in its infancy. It is unlikely to result in a system of sufficient reliability in the timeframe being contemplated by the Pentagon. The testing program has seen numerous failures and highly-qualified 'successes'. The challenge of distinguishing between a missile warhead and the accompanying decoys has not yet been resolved. American taxpayers should take careful note of this before acquiescing to the massive expenditure of public funds on this program. One of the greatest threats to their national security could come not just from the likes of Osama bin Laden or North Korea, but from uncontrolled spending on 'homeland defence'.

2) *Active defences will deal effectively with the threat.* One of the dangers of relying on technology is that the problem it is intended to address is only partly technological; it is also political. Focusing all of its attention on a technological 'solution' may tempt the US to forgo efforts to achieve non-proliferation goals through diplomatic means. Active defences cannot and should not be regarded as a complete substitute for political and economic levers to reign in 'rogue' missile programs. Having chosen to talk to North Korea rather than isolate it, Washington seems to have finally (and belatedly) realized this. But whether it will be able or inclined to buy Kim Jong-Il's full co-operation is unclear.

3) *Missile defence can protect against accidental missile launches.* A launch resulting from spurious information or a technical fault is a command and control problem. If the US is truly worried that Russia's early warning systems and launch facilities are unreliable, why not spend a portion of the missile defence budget to fix them? There is a precedent for this. Under the Co-operative Threat Reduction Program, America has already spent billions of dollars to dismantle older Russian nuclear missiles, bombers and missile-firing submarines.

4) *Missile defence is essential in the post-Cold War/post-9/11 security environment.* To the contrary, it may be quite unnecessary. 'Rogue' states can probably be deterred from using their limited arsenals so long as the US maintains a small and credible nuclear force of its own. Deterrence has a way of maintaining stability until states move toward better relations. The US-Soviet rapprochement in the late 1980s followed this pattern. Thus the threats of war emanating from North Korea should be treated as bluster, rather than as a realistic policy choice for the 'Hermit Kingdom'. Committing national suicide is not on the agenda of President Kim. More likely he is seeking a multi-billion dollar bribe in order to climb down from the nuclear precipice. In the meantime, a clear statement from Washington on how far the risk-taking Mr. Kim can go with his missile testing and his exports of nuclear and missile technology to other countries should reduce the chances of miscalculation on the his part.

But if states can be deterred, what about non-state actors armed with a martyr complex and an implacable hatred of the United Sates and the West? On this point we may rest easy. There is virtually no chance of so-called 'undeterrables' (ie. terrorist groups) utilizing missiles to deliver an exotic weapon into America's (or Canada's) heartland. Terrorists have neither the physical infrastructure nor the engineering savvy to acquire and launch an inter-continental missile. In order to do that, one needs the resources and the full co-operation of a nation-state. After the swift US-led victories in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is unlikely that any leader would consent to the use of his territory for a missile attack on the US, knowing that the Americans would move quickly to topple his regime. Again, miscalculation of American intentions and resolve is less likely today than during the Clinton Administration when America's response to attacks on its citizens was tepid at best.[4]

Whither Canada?

Canadians have more leeway in their bilateral defence relations with the US than many suspect. Despite the none-too-subtle urgings of US Ambassador Paul Cellucci, there is little direct pressure on Canada to actively join the program. Indeed, most high-ranking US officials are doing nothing more than waiting passively for Canada to decide if or how it wishes to climb aboard a train that is already leaving the station. Although Washington would welcome Canadian technology and military personnel as part of the missile shield, it knows that Canadian cities would enjoy its protection regardless of what Ottawa decides. For these reasons, passive participation or even non-participation may be the government's safest option. It would also be consistent with Ottawa's policy-making style: defence 'on the cheap'. Still, a government which opts for non-participation may have to endure the marginalization of NORAD, and thus Canada, in the US strategic pecking order.

But even though a polite 'no' would not alter Washington's plans, launching a crusade against missile defence would not endear Canada to it most important ally and trading partner. Honest disagreements over the proper means of achieving foreign policy goals can and do occur, and on how to deal with a recalcitrant Iraq Canada has shown that it is mature enough to disagree publicly with its neighbour's course of action. As Canada has nothing to atone for, there is no question of Canada agreeing to participate in missile defence in order to curry favour in Washington.

But any attempt to rally international support for the derailment of a plan considered by many Americans - rightly or wrongly - to be essential to their safety will not be passed off lightly in the post-9/11 world. Witness how France's attempts to restrain the US over Iraq have plunged relations

into the deep-freeze, prompting even moderates such as Secretary of Sate Colin Powell to acknowledge that there will be tangible consequences for the Franco-American relationship.

Not can Ottawa fall back on the assertion that it need not give serious consideration to the issue because deployment of the system is a 'hypothetical' scenario. It is not. whether to join or not. The question for Canadians is arguably not whether to support or oppose missile defence. It is how to reconcile themselves to a decision that has been made in the US.

Canada's participation could be 'active', in the sense that Canadian technology could be incorporated into the system and additional military personnel allocated to the NORAD command structure. As the former will come mostly from the private sector, and the latter from existing human resources, there is little chance that active involvement will result in noticeable increases to the defence budget.

'Passive' participation envisions no additional personnel - only R&D projects and technology transfer to US prime contractors. This might include data fusion and remote sensing - two areas in which Canadian companies have made great strides. Since this level of participation draws on 'sunk costs' borne by primarily the private sector, there should be no need for the Canadian taxpayer to assume the technical and financial risks associated with such a complex endeavour.

Current Canadian policy does not favour the deployment of weapons in space, and recent government statements to the effect that the weaponization of space would be cause Ottawa to withhold participation in missile defence should be seen as tactical move; a concession to parliamentarians who oppose Canada's participation in missile defence under any circumstances. However shrewd it may be, this might only bring a temporary calm to the debate. If the United Sates deploys non-nuclear defences in space *after* Canada agrees to share in the missile defence burden, Ottawa may be put in the unenviable position of having to either reverse its stance on the weaponization of space or withdraw from any bilateral agreements it has signed with respect to missile defence.

To minimize the chances of these outcomes, Canada's position on space-based defences should be clarified. As the Outer Space Treaty does not explicitly ban non-nuclear defences, Canada has, in effect, taken a position against something that is not illegal. Ottawa could plausibly argue that anti-missile defences are 'non-aggressive', in the that they do not enable the user to take and hold territory. But an equally plausible counter-argument could be mounted on the basis that the deployment of such weapons, while not proscribed, nevertheless breaks the spirit of the OST.

Regardless of whether Canada's contribution to ballistic missile defence is active, passive, or non-existent (in which case Canada will still enjoy a measure of protection), Ottawa should engage its ally constructively by lending a sense of perspective on what missile defence can and cannot achieve given current technology. It should remind Washington that the defence system must remain limited in scope so as not to create a false sense of invulnerability. It should point out that if the ground-based interceptors can be made to work, there should be no need to weaponize outer space. It should encourage the US to explore additional methods of dealing with the perceived missile threat - methods that do not legitimize the extortion techniques of existing and would-be proliferators. Finally, it could encourage the US and Russia to combine their technological prowess to create a system offering protection against limited strikes to all countries within striking distance of 'rogue' missiles.[5] If it adopts this pragmatic strategy, Canada will be doing itself, its ally, and the broader international community a great and lasting service.

Conclusion

Clearly, the partisans in the missile defence debate have much explaining to do. On the one hand the program's most vocal proponents may be accused of exaggerating the threat, and of overestimating what current technology can deliver. On the other, the specious counter-arguments and apocalyptic scenarios put forth by missile defence's opponents may lull Canadians into a false sense of understanding of a complex issue. As it stands, the system proposed by the United States is only virtual. Thankfully the debate is not. But it risks becoming stale if it depends on little more than alarmism and the repetition of mere myths. Good continental and international security policy cannot be formulated if support for or opposition to missile defence is allowed to coalesce around simplistic arguments or unrealistic assessments of the technological and strategic landscape.

Notes

[1]A version of this essay appeared in the *Winnipeg Free Press* on 4 May, 2003.

[2]"PM shifts on missile defence", Jeff Sallot and Daniel Leblanc, *The Globe and Mail*, 6 May, 2003, A1.

[3]The US Air Force is conducting earth-based testing an airborne laser (ABL) for missile defence purposes. The laser is mounted in the nose of a modified Boeing 747 jetliner.

[4]Following the 1998 attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, Washington launched ineffectual cruise missile attacks against alleged terrorist training camps in Afghanistan and a 'chemical weapons' production facility in Sudan.

[5]Global Protection Against Limited Strikes (GPALS) was first proposed by former Russian President Boris Yeltsin to US President George H. W. Bush in 1991.

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